

Comments sought on new IHS plan

The Indian Health Service must afford tribes, tribal organizations and Congress the opportunity to study and comment on its new funding policy before it is fully implemented, Sen. Murkowski, R-Alaska, said recently.

Because of Murkowski's concern about the premature implementation of this program, Sen. Mark Andrews, chairman of the Select Committee on Indian Affairs, agreed to an amendment to the Indian Health Care Improvement Reauthorization Act. The amendment requires that the details of the new policy be published in the Federal Register.

Murkowski said the IHS is in the process of implementing a new method of distributing its funds to Indian health care providers. The method, known as the Resource Allocation Methodology — RAM, is an attempt by the Indian Health Service to distribute funds on a more equitable basis.

"While I support this concept of equitable distribution, I have concerns about several aspects of the RAM process because it would make radical changes in current IHS policy," he said.

The senator noted that under the new proposal, the IHS would offset 90 percent of Medicaid and Medicare collection against funding allocations for service units and areas. In addition, 30 percent of IHS funds would be distributed according to a health status indicator that is "often criticized as severely flawed," he said.

Murkowski's amendment would require IHS to publish regulations on RAM, allow the opportunity for comment and actively consult with tribes and tribal organizations on the procedure for implementation.

"I am firmly convinced that the implementation of RAM must be postponed until the tribes and tribal organizations have the opportunity to study and comment on the proposed components of RAM, which must be published in the Federal Register," Murkowski said.

"In addition, Congress must have the opportunity to scrutinize the methodology and to evaluate IHS' efforts to address the concerns of the Indian and Alaska Native people."

Murkowski's amendment has received support from the National Indian Health Board, the Alaska Native Health Board and Alaska Regional Health Directors.

"It would be extremely premature to implement RAM without adequate consultation with Indian and Alaska Native health providers," Murkowski said.

The act now moves to the Senate floor for approval.